

Knowing Duxbury's Roots

Part III - Myles Standish's arrival in Duxbury

By Mary McKenzie
Clipper Reporter



Myles Standish Monument in Duxbury. Editor's note: This is the third part of a new series exploring Duxbury's roots. Last week's story focused on how Myles Standish, one of the best known of Duxbury's first English settlers, dealt with Native Americans in order to help the Plymouth colony survive. In part three, the story looks at how Standish came to Duxbury and how he made history even after death.

In 1624, Myles Standish remarried to Barbara Mullins and they had seven children. At this time, he was still on active duty for the colony and in 1625, when a group of

English settlers lead by Thomas Morton, came to what is now Quincy in a spot officially called "Mount Wollaston" at the time, but nicknamed "Merrymount," another problem ensued for Standish.

The men of Merrymount drank openly and often, didn't go to church, built a Maypole and sold weapons to Native Americans. The Pilgrims found this behavior dangerous and in 1628, Bradford, particularly concerned by the sale of weapons to the Native Americans, sent Standish up to Merrymount to arrest Morton.

Word had gotten out about this and when Standish got there, Morton and several men were barricaded in a building, drinking heavily. Morton aimed a gun at Standish, but Standish grabbed the weapon from his hands and took him back to Plymouth. Morton was sent back to England after that. He wrote a book later in life, the "New English Canaan" and referred to Standish as "Captain Shrimp" and said he found the Massachusetts Indians more humane than the Christians.

Coming to Duxbury Plymouth colony seemed to always be in debt to the London firm that financed them, the Merchant Adventurers. The colonists wanted desperately to renegotiate the debt.

In 1627, Standish became one of the leading settlers (there were 12) to assume the colony's outstanding debt in exchange for freedoms in trade and land ownership. Several of the families decided to take on the debt so the colony could thrive. Large farm lots were parceled out to colonists in the towns that are now Plymouth, Kingston, Duxbury and Marshfield. Standish received 120 acres in Duxbury and built a house and settled there in 1628.

He was given power of attorney by the Council of New England in 1630 by the Council of New England to oversee the transfer of land rights to the Plymouth Colony.

Standish was elected treasurer six times afterward.

The problem at Penobscot Standish's next and last effort was against the French, who had established a trading post in 1613 on the Penobscot River in what is now Castine, Maine. English forces captured it and turned it over to the Plymouth Colony in 1628. It became a valuable source for furs and timber for the Pilgrims for seven years. In 1635, the French mounted an expedition and reclaimed the settlement. Governor Bradford ordered Captain Standish to defend the post and reclaim it for Plymouth from the French.

It was a much bigger endeavor than anything Standish had dealt with before. He chartered the ship "Good Hope," which he planned to bring within cannon-shooting distance of the post and bombard it until the French surrendered. Unfortunately, the ship's captain, a man called Girling in some documents but always referred to without a first name, started bombarding the shore before the ship was within range to hit the post and used up all the gunpowder without any real effect. Standish retreated.

Bradford appealed to the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for help reclaiming the post, which the leaders in Boston refused to do. The two colonies eventually became united in 1691 as the Royal Province of Massachusetts Bay, but this refusal was a sticking point in their relationship for many years.

After the Penobscot problem, Standish's life settled down and he focused on farming here in Duxbury. During the Pequot War of 1635, Standish was appointed to a committee to get together 30 men, but his subordinate, Lieutenant William Holmes trained and led the men.

At that time, the people living in Duxbury/Duxborough wanted to break from the colony and create a separate church and have their own minister. In 1637, they got their wish and Duxbury got its own church, what is now First Parish of Duxbury.

Hobbamock and Standish stick together until the end Hobbamock had come to live with Standish but died in 1642 and was buried at Standish's farm.

As he grew older, Standish stepped more and more away from his military role and became more of an administrator. He served as surveyor of highways, new towns, waterways and was treasurer of the colony from 1644 to 1649.

In 1656, Standish died of a condition related to kidney stones or bladder cancer referred to as "strangullion" or "strangury." He was buried in what is now known as the Myles Standish Cemetery, and he was dug up three times while there.

Three times exhumed In 1887, when many were confused about where Standish was buried, and many edifices from those original settlers had been knocked down, a movement grew to figure out the lines of what was referred to as the "Old Burying Ground" and the location of the First Meetinghouse. Operating on the long-standing word-of-mouth story that Myles Standish and other Mayflower passengers were buried in the cemetery from the family that lived next to the cemetery and had passed down a story that Myles was buried beneath two, rough, pyramid-shaped fieldstones, the site was exhumed in 1888 after much debate.

When the exhumation was done, a woman's skeleton was found and then a man's. Frederick Bradford Knapp, the then-president of Duxbury Rural Society (as well as headmaster for the Powder Point School for Boys and the former Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds at Harvard), had not wanted to disturb the gravesite, and ultimately "nothing was found to prove that this man was Myles Standish," he said.

But questions remained on whether that exhumation gave any answers to any questions. St. John's Parish rector Eugene J.V. Huiginn was one of those who sought a new exhumation of the site, as he had become convinced that the site contained the skeleton of Standish.

"I concluded that the searching party of 1889 ought to have opened more graves," he wrote. "It is strange, when you think of it, that a company of educated, thoughtful people should have discontinued the search just at the moment when their efforts would have been crowned by success. My evidence all being prepared, I was anxious to get permission to open the graves."

Huiginn was later elected President of the Rural Society and he obtained permission to open the graves again. So in April of 1891, a larger area was opened and several graves and it was discovered that the male skeleton was buried between two women (Standish had asked in his will to be buried between his daughter and daughter-in-law), and two boys, who they figured were Charles and John Standish, both of whom had died as children. Huiginn noticed that a Standish descendent present had a similar head shape to the skeleton and a doctor noted that the hairs still on the adult male skeleton's head were red and gray and the man had been very physically strong.

Huiginn started an effort to create a memorial to the site, but many were opposed to spending money on that and the Rural Society decided to step away from the idea in 1892. It grew to be such a controversy that much of the Rural Society membership created Duxbury Historical and Antiquarian Society, which started seeking money for a gravesite monument for Standish. This was completed in 1893 for \$364. Eventually, these members came back to the Duxbury Rural Society and a new group was made, the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society.

So even well into his death, Myles Standish was forming Duxbury.

But the poor man's grave was not to be left alone for that long. In 1931, Knapp (the man who did not want to disturb the grave in the first place), was overseeing another exhumation at the site. Town Selectmen were concerned that Standish's remains had been placed into a wooden coffin and wanted the bones placed in a hermetically sealed copper box instead, and then place that into a cement chamber. Many people attended this third exhumation including civic groups and many Duxbury residents. For now that has been the last time, that the public has had a peek into the grave of a man who gave so much of his life, wits and energy to Duxbury, the Queen of England, the country of Holland, the British Army, a tribe of disgruntled English separatists, and ultimately, to America.

Myles Standish's legacy So what is Standish's legacy? For one, Massachusetts probably wouldn't have gotten more settlements if the Plymouth one didn't survive – it took awhile for interest in settling in Virginia to revive after a fatal attempt to do so in Roanoke. The Plymouth

Colony owed their survival largely to Standish – not just to protect the settlement from invasion by others but when the people were dying he reacted to that emergency with superhuman effort as well. His methods of dealing with the Indians and controversies with other settlements will always remain controversial as they were at the time. Despite this glaring problem, he was deeply involved in making the Plymouth Colony and later, the town of Duxbury, viable.

This complicated man, known for his bravery and his temper, who was also known to be gentle with those who were vulnerable or ill, was very much respected by his fellow colonists and that respect carried on well after his death. His monument in Duxbury, which can be seen from many places in town and on the water, is the third largest dedicated to a single person in our nation. His name lives on from Standish Street to Standish Shore in Duxbury and his likeness on an illustration of the monument is on the town seal for Duxbury. (An interesting note: While many think it was Standish's sword that got knocked down off of the monument by lightning, it was actually a scroll, according to DRHS archivist Carolyn Ravenscroft. Standish's sword remains on his hip on the monument.)

Indeed, tributes to the man can be seen in much of eastern Massachusetts. The enduring efforts of Standish to make Plymouth a successful colony are recognized in much more than history books.

Plymouth was named before the Mayflower arrived

One little known fact is that the town of Plymouth was already named by explorers who had hunted and fished there on the many trips made from Europe to the Americas.

"It appears in maps dated five years earlier as Plymouth," Duxbury Rural and Historical Society archivist Carolyn Ravenscroft noted. "It already had its name."